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NORDAU'S THEORY OF DEGENERATION.

I.—A PAINTER'S VIEW.

BY KENYON COX.

THE scientific value of Max Nordau's book, *Degeneration*, scientific men may determine. I can only give the impressions of an unscientific person on that part of the work which deals with his own specialty.

A painter with classical tendencies—one who admires Raphael and still respects even Gérôme—is likely to open Nordau's volume with some anticipations of enjoyment. A scientific demonstration of the mental unsoundness of the "Impressionists" and the "*Rose Croix*" appeals to him as perhaps plausible and not undesirable, and "degenerate," "hysteric," "mattoid" are beautiful names to hurl at the artists of the "Yellow Book" or the sensation hunters of the *Champs de Mars*. If it can be proved that tendencies in painting which seem to him morbid and unhealthy are really the result of disease, his cause is gained. He, therefore, begins to read Nordau's book with sympathetic attention and perfect willingness to be convinced. The sympathy does not last long. One may be a classicist and out of touch with much that passes for art to-day, but one is still an artist and is shocked to find that the "great majority of the middle and lower classes" are declared to possess all that is left of mental soundness in a decaying age and that this soundness is said to show itself in the fact that "the Philistine or the Proletarian still finds undiluted satisfaction in the old and oldest forms of art . . . he contemplates gladly chromos of paintings depicting Munich beer-houses and rustic taverns, and passes the open-air painters without a glance." If "the grateful *clientèle* of the chromo" is to be the judge of sanity we artists are all in the same boat together. The argument is proving altogether too much for our comfort.

and it behooves us to keep a sharp watch on the reasoning which leads to so unpleasant a conclusion. The noble and austere art of Puvis de Chavannes is set down as the work of a degenerate beside that of the "stipplers" or the symbolists. What is the argument and what are the mental characteristics of the man who would have us accept so preposterous a result?

The characteristics of Mr. Nordau which strike one most forcibly are, in the order in which one perceives them, these: violence of language, arrogance, inaccuracy, inconsistency, lack of humor, and total inability to comprehend art. The first two characteristics are so evident everywhere, from the first page to the last, that it is hardly necessary to point out special instances of them. The fragments which I shall cite for other purposes will supply more than a sufficiency of examples of violence. The crowning example of arrogance I reserve for the last. Let me then take up his other traits one by one, and justify by quotations what Mr. Nordau would call my "diagnosis."

The school of painting on which he expends the greatest amount of space is the English Pre-Raphaelite school. This is somewhat like slaying the dead, but no matter. His account of the formation and doctrines of that school is full of misstatements.

"In the year 1843 . . . Ruskin began to publish the feverish studies on art which were subsequently collected under the title of *Modern Painters*." (P. 78).

Modern Painters was not a collection of studies "feverish" or otherwise.

"The Pre-Raphaelites, who got all their leading principles from Ruskin." (P. 81).

This has been disproved again and again. Ruskin took up the movement and explained it after it was started, and his account of its doctrines was never accepted by the leaders.

"They, however, raised it to the position of a fundamental principle, that in order to express devotion and noble feeling the artist must be defective in form." (P. 81).

This nonsense is Nordau's own. No such principle was ever announced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as that artists should be deformed, or even (which is what he means to say) that they should be unable to draw.

"His (Rossetti's) father gave him the name of the great poet at his entrance into the world, etc." (P. 88).

His father did nothing of the kind. In 1847 Rossetti still signed himself "Gabriel Chas. Rossetti."* He adopted the "Dante" later, and all Nordau's argument of the influence of his name upon his character falls to the ground.

Apparently our author can be accurate in nothing. He speaks of the "P. R. B. exhibition" in 1849 as if it were a separate exhibition of the Brotherhood alone (p. 70) and states twice that Rossetti "soon exchanged the brush for the pen." He cannot even describe a picture correctly, for he says that the figure of Christ in Holman Hunt's "Shadow of the Cross" "is standing in the Oriental *attitude of prayer* . . . the shadow of his body falling *on the ground*" (p. 85). Both the statements I have italicized are untrue.

Now for his inconsistency. Among the proofs he relies on for his statement that "Ruskin's theory is in itself delirious," and that Ruskin is a "degenerate," are the well known contradictions of that author. He takes up one of them and shows that Ruskin is absurd in that he demands of the painter on one page the blindest copying of nature, while on another he admits the existence of the typical or ideal form which it is the business of the painter to recognize and reproduce. Will it be believed that Nordau proceeds to fall into the same contradiction himself?

"Only one of these mutually exclusive statements can be true," says he, on page 83. "Unquestionably it is the former." And he proceeds to make his own that doctrine of absolute fidelity to fact, which is the worst feature of Ruskin's teaching. "The ideal form is an assumption. . . . To exclude individual features from a phenomenon as unessential and accidental, and to retain others as intrinsic and necessary, is to reduce it to an abstract idea. The work of art, however, is not to abstract, but to individualize." Yet on p. 333, where he is trying to prove something else, he says: "Next, the work of art grants an insight into the laws of which the phenomenon is the expression; for the artist, in his creation, separates the essential from the accidental . . . divines the idea behind the structure . . . and discloses it in his work to the spectator." It is not often that any one can be so superbly inconsistent as this; but the way in which diametrically opposite symptoms prove the same disease seems strange to the unscientific mind. "Red," says our author,

*William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical Notes, etc.*, vol. 1, p. 244.
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"is dynamogenous, hence it is intelligible that hysterical painters revel in red. . . . Violet is conversely enervating and inhibitive. . . . This suggests that painters suffering from hysteria . . . will be inclined to cover their pictures uniformly with" violet. Blue and yellow are "the very two colors the sensations of which in hysterical amblyopia endure the longest," so that a fondness for them is also a sign of degeneration. Do not imagine, however, that the love of neutral tints is any better. The "whitewash of Puvis de Chavannes," the "problematical vapor, reeking as if with a cloud of incense," of Carrière, or the "ditchwater and dissolved clay" of Raffaelli, are signs of an even more completely diseased state than are the "grass-green hair" and "faces of sulphur-yellow"—the "revolutionary debauch of color"—of Besnard.

Mr. Nordau's lack of humor is shown again and again in his fury at "witticisms." One of the great signs of mental degeneration, according to him, is the tendency to perpetrate these.

Nordau's insensibility to art is shown in many ways. He never praises any artist, be he poet, painter or musician, except those whose reputation is so firmly established as to be beyond all cavil. Shakespeare and Goethe and Beethoven he says he admires, but there is no word to show that he has ever cared for anything in art except what a man may not despise in the face of the world without being a self-confessed barbarian. What he does praise or admire in art is almost always successful imitation. In painting he sees "a sensuously agreeable impression of beautiful single colors (!), and happily combined harmonies of color," but there is no sign that beauty of line or fine composition has ever appeared to him to exist. "An illusion of reality together with the consciousness that it is an illusion" are "the higher and more intellectual pleasures" to be derived from the contemplation of works of art (p. 80). "Sane artists," he says, "as a general rule will produce works which are so-called realistic," and "artists unhealthily emotional" or "hysterical, neurasthenic, and degenerate subjects, and every kind of lunatic" will produce "works so-called idealistic." The claim that "artistic activity is the highest of which the human mind is capable" makes him furious. "Why?" he says. "Because the amount of artistic technique involved is difficult? If that is to be the decisive point, then, to be logical, the *Æsthetes* must place the acrobat higher

than the artist of their species, since it is much more difficult to learn the art of the trapezist than the rhyming and daubing which constitutes the ‘art’ of the *Aesthetes*.’’ The “monarchical state” is “atavistic” when it gives the highest place to the soldier, but it is very right when it gives the next highest to the scholar who we are triumphantly told, “as professor, academician, counsellor, is a constituent part of the governmental machine, and honors and dignities fall far more to his lot than to the poet and artist.” It is true that “even persons of good and serious minds” place some artists “on a level with, or even above, the man of science,” but this is because “art is equally a source of knowledge” (p. 333). Finally, he prophesies in this way: “It is fair to conclude that after some centuries art and poetry will have become pure atavisms, and will no longer be cultivated, except by the most emotional portion of humanity —by women, by the young, perhaps even by children” (p. 543). If his arguments would prove all art a disease so much the worse for art—“that would still prove nothing against the correctness of his critical method” (p. 552), and he would “raise no objection to this conclusion” (p. 553). And he has the objector on the hip, for if you chance to admire anything “the madness of which is at the first glance apparent to every rational being” (*i. e.* to the author), you are as mad as the artist you admire. The unanswerable argument, the key to the whole book and to the author’s state of mind, is to be found on page 123. “We find in every lunatic and imbecile the conviction that the rational minds who discern and judge him are blockheads.”

What can one answer to a champion thus armed in triple brass? There is nothing for it but to turn his statement end for end and see how it reads. “We find in every blockhead the conviction that the artist whom he cannot understand is a lunatic or an imbecile.” Is it not as convincing so? What “diagnosis” Mr. Nordau would make of another who showed such “stigmata” as his own we need not guess. To me his symptoms are easily read. Abusiveness, arrogance, inaccuracy, inconsistency, lack of humor, insensibility to art, what are all these but the signs of Philistinism? In his preface he extols his own courage, saying, “I have no doubt as to the consequences to myself of my initiative.” To attack the Church or the State is “nothing venturesome. . . . But grievous is the fate of him who has the

audacity to characterize æsthetic fashions as forms of mental decay." Pshaw ! my dear sir, you are fighting in the safest and most popular of causes. It may be true that the "author or artist attacked," with not unnatural asperity, "never pardons a man for recognizing in him a lunatic or a charlatan." But who cares what *he* thinks ? "The great majority of the middle and lower classes" are with you. If any one speaks for the poor devil, call *him* a lunatic too and the trick is done. Your predecessor is thus mentioned in the First Book of Samuel :

"And there went out a champion out of the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. And he had an helmet of brass upon his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail ; and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of brass. And he had greaves of brass upon his legs, and a target of brass between his shoulders. . . . And he stood and cried . . . Am not I a Philistine ?" And there are no Davids now, like the *frondeur* of old, to bring down the giant with a pebble-stone.

KENYON COX.

II.—A MUSICIAN'S RETORT.

BY ANTON SEIDL.

THE reading of Max Nordau's book at first filled me with disgust. As I progressed with it, however, I became convinced that it was not the work of a pessimist, striving to be sensational, but of a man of unbalanced mind, like one of those unfortunates frequently met with in lunatic asylums, who appear while you converse with them to be perfectly rational, but suddenly spring ideas at you that clearly demonstrate that their intellect is unsettled. Such an apparently sane person tells you, with an air of importance and pity, that every inmate of the institution, except himself, is crazy ; while he is the craziest of them all.

How greatly distorted the mental faculties of Mr. Nordau are, he betrays on the second page of his scurrilous chapter on Wagner, where, in order to substantiate his silly accusations, he refers to Mr. Praeger's biography of the great musician—a book which, after having been branded by some of our most noted and conscientious critics as a network of ridiculous assertions and

infamous misrepresentations, was withdrawn from the market by its publishers. But this discredited book, with its false dates, its false quotations, and incomprehensible inferences, is accepted by Mr. Nordau as a trustworthy source of information.

Mr. Nordau proceeds to fable of "dancing and howling dervishes," who, in the *Bayreuther Blaetter*, burn incense before their fetish, Wagner. Every branch of art has its organs for promoting its interests. Wagner also perceived the necessity of speaking to the cultured world, not only by means of his music and his works, but also through the press.

Nordau's short explanation of the principle of Wagner's art might have been written by a caged-up lunatic ! Take, for instance, expressions and conclusions such as these : that the architecture of Cologne Cathedral impresses one without the by-work of a dramatic performance ; or that the Pastoral Symphony impresses one without explanatory words ; or that Faust's depth and beauty can gain nothing by adding music to it.

Well, I believe one can safely say that the grandeur of the architecture of Cologne Cathedral impresses one a thousandfold more when seen during high-mass, when the magnificent edifice is filled with the delicious fumes of incense and resplendent with myriads of lights ! Furthermore it is a well-known fact that, in all theatres of high rank, the lack of music during productions of "Faust" was deeply felt, and that was why most of them introduced music during such performances with more or less success. And then if Beethoven in the "Partitur" of his "Pastoral Symphony" had not given a few hints in regard to his ideas or intentions concerning his music, I wonder how many different versions there would now be in existence. Perhaps, for instance, Mr. Nordau might have mistaken the manifestations of rapture on the arrival at the idyllic country-place for the merry bustle in the market-place of a town.

In imitation of Mr. Praeger, Mr. Nordau revels in unintelligible and absurd perversions. He speaks of Schopenhauer as condemning "grand opera," but he avoids mention of the fact that Wagner himself pronounces the so-called "grand opera" to be humbug. Mr. Nordau either deliberately confounds Meyerbeer's "grand opera" with Wagner's musical drama, or he proves himself incompetent to understand or criticise Wagner's works.

This writer upbraids Wagner for his bombastic style of

writing, and cites a few of Wagner's expressions, which he declares to be incomprehensible. But let us take a glance at Mr. Nordau's own style of writing. How, for instance, is this: "What Wagner takes for evolution (speaking about 'Art-work of the Future') is retrogression, and a return to a primeval human, nay, to a *pre-human stage*?"

It is not to be wondered at that Mr. Nordau, in viewing with Mr. Praeger, sees in all those who occupy themselves with Wagner, who impersonate or sing his characters, who play his music, or read his works, degenerate beings. He even strives to prove, by words patched together, that Wagner was an anarchist! Does not this show that Nordau is ripe for the insane asylum, if only in the capacity of cicerone?

Wagner is declared to be erratic, because he sings ever the praise of woman. What then were Schiller, Goethe, Beethoven and many others who did the same thing?

He speaks further of the shameless sensuality of Wagner's poems and cites Hanslick. A nice fraternity indeed! He vilifies the German public who listened to the first act of "Walkuere" without blushing just as if Parisians, New Yorkers, Londoners and St. Petersburghers, had not become enthusiastic over this musical drama! Nordau, the writer of the book "Degeneration," as preacher of morals!

The elaborations on Wagner's "Redemption" idea are indeed the most rancorous and unreasonable portion of the chapter. Here he brings Mr. Nietzsche forward as witness, a man who is known to have been mentally deranged for years. Well, who does not detect in that the action of the lunatic, who shows the unsuspecting visitor about the asylum, telling him that everybody in the institution, doctors included, himself only excepted, is crazy, until the visitor suddenly discovers to his horror a dangerous maniac in his cicerone.

Mr. Nordau's Praegeristic treatment displays itself also in another instance. He cites Nietzsche as a competent critic of Wagner's dramatic poetry, but rejects Nietzsche as of imbecile judgment in criticizing Wagner the musician. That is called consistency! And Nordau charges Wagner with inconsistency!

All that Nordau prates about Wagner's music proves clearly that he understands it no more than a policeman does the art of casting a bell. It is true there are many others who share this

stupidity with him; but he is altogether asinine when he declares that one may go to Bayreuth only when one knows all the "leit-motifs" by heart. According to his own confession, he does not know them himself, and yet he sits in judgment on them. This kind of action is more than moral degeneration.

Nordau is seeking the laurels of an Erostratus. There are persons who can accomplish nothing of their own, and these imagine that it may be very lucrative to demolish whatever great and beautiful thing has been created by others, so that attention may be attracted to themselves.

ANTON SEIDL.

III.—AS TO AGE-END LITERATURE.

BY MAYO W. HAZELTINE.

If the book called *Degeneration*, by Max Nordau, has challenged successfully the attention of cultivated readers in many civilized countries, it is, of course, because he has tried to satisfy a craving of the perplexed public mind by suggesting a cause of certain phenomena, which, in these dying years of the Nineteenth Century, are widespread, patent, and regrettable. Moreover, he has not only propounded a possible cause, but one that is physiological, for which, therefore, the sufferers need not hold themselves morally responsible, and from whose maleficent effect they may hope to recover, when organized society shall have better adjusted itself to the new conditions produced by the multiplex employment of steam and electricity in human affairs. A moment's reflection, however, will demonstrate that this cause is inadequate to account for the effect ascribed to it. The introduction of the railway, the steamship, the telegraph and the telephone, with the consequent amplification of markets, agglomeration of capital, and intensification of directing intellect, are matters that concern, almost exclusively, the commercial and industrial classes, to which the age-end literature, which Mr. Nordau makes the subject of discussion, never appeals, and by which it is seldom, if ever, read. It cannot be truthfully said that the upper ten thousand, of whom alone, even in France, the author of *Degeneration*, as he confesses, speaks, have been subjected to much, if any, extra cerebral strain through the application of steam and electricity to

social purposes. As a matter of fact, the brain tissues and nervous system of the affluent, leisurely, or idle class are taxed less than they were a hundred, or even fifty, years ago. Brilliant conversation has gone out of fashion ; people send by wire messages which formerly would have been couched in conventional epistles ; unlike merchants and manufacturers, whose correspondence is undoubtedly much larger, yet who have not in the least degenerated, the upper ten thousand write fewer letters and shorter ones ; and when they read, peruse more newspapers and fewer books. Few persons probably would contend that the scanning of an average newspaper imposes more wear and tear upon the gray matter of the brain than does the digestion of a printed volume. It seems clear, then, that since the class specially addressed by the literature reviewed with so much pungency by Max Nordau cannot be regarded as in any sense the victim of the gradual applications of science during the last half century, we must seek elsewhere for the cause of the literary phenomena characteristic of our day, and by us designated, half sadly and half scoffingly, as *fin de siècle*.

I.

NOTHING delights unoccupied persons like the belief that, while commonly misunderstood, they are deeply worthy of being comprehended ; and nothing pleases the idle class at any given epoch like the assurance that they have been placed by circumstances in a unique position, strangely agitated and profoundly interesting. Alive to this fact, and determined to produce a popular book, Mr. Nordau studiously refrained from doing what he was of course fully competent to do, namely, pointing out that there is nothing new in the attitude of certain morbid outgrowths of our age-end literature toward religion and morality ; that the phenomenon, instead of being unique, is periodic, and, in truth, familiar to even the casual student of history. It is a phenomenon inseparable from a widely prevalent decay of faith. It was characteristic of the first century of our era throughout the Mediterranean world, and conspicuously in the city of Rome ; it was recognizable during the last half of the twelfth century in all countries using the Provençal tongue ; it was observed and denounced in Italy, where, in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Renaissance became decadent ; it was not only visible

but intrusive and obnoxious in France when the *ancien régime* was moribund. The Latin literature that glorified the indulgence of the senses and acknowledged no subordination of pleasure to duty, the literature that began with Catullus and Ovid, and that reached perhaps its lowest depth in Petronius Arbiter, bore unconscious but conclusive witness to the fact that belief in the old Roman and Greek gods was dead, and that the conversion of Constantine to the religion preached by the disciples of Jesus was yet distant. The songs of the Provençal troubadours and the fundamental rules of life laid down by the courts of love, whereof the minstrels were the inspirers and reporters, if not the lawgivers, testify to the inoculation of Christianity with infidel and Manichæan tenets, and to a pervasive corruption, so far as the higher orders were concerned, which probably has not been equalled since the groves of Daphne were closed at Antioch. What shall one say of the literature of renascent Italy from the time of Boccaccio to the purification and regeneration of Catholicism under the successors of Leo X? It was an epoch during which even Popes were accused of being free-thinkers, while artists and nobles were to a very large extent infected with the suspicion, if not conviction, that an overruling Providence and a life beyond the grave were fables. That part of the work produced by Italian men of letters in the Renaissance which is still current is sufficiently tainted, but there was another part which has been long since veiled from sight and buried in the crypts of libraries. Products of a decline of faith, those books betrayed the tendency, as yet unavowed if not unconscious, of a materialistic and egoistic philosophy to divorce art entirely from altruistic ethics. If now we pass to the last half century of the *ancien régime* in France, we find the skepticism of the upper classes regarding duties to God reflected in the writings of Voltaire, and their disregard of duties and decencies toward fellow beings mirrored in scores of novels, from the artistic though immoral pages of the Abbé Prévost to the salacious narratives of Crébillon Fils, Louvet and the Marquis de Sade, by the side of which the ruthless self-dissection of Rousseau seems sane, robust and wholesome.

II.

THUS we see that Nordau's book, striking as it is, is but another example of the maxim that there is nothing new under

the sun. Godlessness and vice are as old as Sodom, and if the cities of the plain possessed a literature, and it were extant, we should undoubtedly find in it a warrant for their holocaust. It is plain enough that all the previous outbreaks of viciousness in literature were not ascribable to physical degeneration ; were not due to any physiological or social, much less mechanical agency, but should be attributed, simply and purely, to a moral cause. It is probable that the world never saw a more tremendous transformation of man's social energies than took place in the countries bordering the Mediterranean under the benignant influence of the Roman peace. Not to this surely can be imputed the abhorrent influx of impiety, malevolence and lubricity, which cursed the realm of the Cæsars during the first century of our era. To what can we reasonably charge it but to the fact that the minds of men, no longer preoccupied with war, were awakened to the disappearance of their ancient religious beliefs under the corrosive impact of the Attic schools of philosophy, and especially of the school which found in Lucretius an eloquent expounder ? So, too, with the rotten-ripeness of the Provençal-speaking countries towards the close of the twelfth century ; this is not traceable, though it has been traced, to the lucrative position of those lands in the track of the onset of the Western nations against the Saracens in Palestine. No doubt, the Provençals derived wealth and luxury from their geographical situation, but the moral disintegration detected in their literature came from contact with the Oriental ideas brought back by the Crusaders, or transmitted through Saracenic Spain, and which obscured the distinction between good and evil, and obliterated the belief in God and immortality. Again, the epoch of the Renaissance underwent a mechanical influence, comparable for diffusion and magnitude to that of steam and electricity ; we refer, of course, to that exercised by the invention of printing. It would be preposterous, however, to charge the immorality of that age, so conspicuous in its literature, to the use of movable types. The mischievous agency was the absorption of pagan ideas through a sudden and indiscriminate revival of learning. We note, finally, that throughout a large part of the eighteenth century the physical and intellectual energies of France were subjected to the exhausting strain of the duel with England for ascendancy in the New World and in India ; yet of the severe cerebral tension

wrought by the national hunger for political and territorial aggrandizement we find scarcely a sign in contemporary French literature. What exudes from it at every pore is the contempt for religion and traditional morality which must have begun to permeate society before it found exemplars and promoters in Voltaire and the Encyclopedists.

As regards the power of accommodating itself to mere changes of physical or social environment, mankind is still young and vigorous. From this point of view, at all events, the race shows no sign of decrepitude. There is not a jot of evidence that now, or ever, have men failed to adjust swiftly to their cerebral capacity the innumerable applications of the conquests over nature's forces which they themselves have made. It is not the mind, but the heart, that at certain conjunctures wavers. At these crises, when the old religions that aimed to regulate the attitude of man to his Maker, and that gave a sanction and an incentive to right conduct, seem shaken or undermined, the struggle between selfishness and self-sacrifice recurs under conditions trying to all except the sanest and the sweetest natures, and to those, happily the vast majority, who are nailed to altruistic habits by the rivets of hard, daily toil. It is through a crisis of that kind that we are now passing. The rich and cultivated class, to which, mainly, the makers of poetry and artistic fiction address themselves, has as yet failed to put the new wine of science into the old bottles of faith ; it has succeeded but imperfectly in absorbing and assimilating Darwinism and the evolutionary philosophy ; and it has thus far miscarried in the attempt to adjust and reconcile the teachings of the physicists to the traditional beliefs concerning the relation of man to the Deity and his duty to his fellow-creatures. Especially was such a miscarriage to be looked for in France, which had never fully extirpated the skepticism and cynicism with which it had been saturated in the eighteenth century. It will not seem strange that the work of adaptation and accommodation should have been everywhere slow, tentative, and hitherto unfruitful on the part of the upper ten thousand, whom Nordau has in mind, when we recall that the weakest part of Mr. Herbert Spencer's monumental work, the *Synthetic Philosophy*, is admitted to be the Data of Ethics. When the minds of well educated persons are in a state of fluctuation and unrest, of doubt drifting to despair

or to indifference; when not only the fool saith in his heart "There is no God," but the wise man presumes not to rebuke his folly; it is not surprising that lyrical and epic compositions—the novel is, of course, the modern epic—should evince a like recklessness and license, and be spotted all over with signs of divagation from standards of morality once accepted, and even from former canons of taste. This end-of-the-century outgush, however, of impiety and vice in literature, differs from similar antecedent phenomena in this, that in our day the principal transgressors of moral laws in artistic writing seek to justify themselves by a philosophic axiom, whereby a multitude of readers, naturally cleanly and even squeamish, have allowed themselves to be imposed upon. We allude to the axiom of "art for art's sake," the theory that art has nothing to do with morals, a dogma formulated by Kant and Lessing, but debased to uses which it would have given them a nightmare to foresee, by the long and loathsome series of æsthetes, decadents and diabolists.

III.

MAX NORDAU himself seems beset with a misgiving lest the corner-stone of his book, the assumption of physical degeneration, affecting the higher classes and their literary purveyors, if not the whole body of civilized mankind, should prove to be unsound. Accordingly he puts forward a secondary explanation of the indisputable fact that literature glaringly immoral is now much more widely circulated, if not any more respectably championed, than it was in the preceding periods named. He very properly ascribes the fact, partly to the multiplication of readers and the greatly improved facilities for publication, but largely also to the currency of the dogma above mentioned, the dogma of art for art. The chapters in which he attacks this axiom are the strongest and most admirable portions of his brilliant book. He does not, indeed, attempt to treat fully of the relation of the beautiful to morals, for he perceives that, to do this, it would be needful to expound the whole science of æsthetics. Yet he demonstrates that art is not practised for itself alone, but that it has a double aim, subjective and objective, to wit, first, the satisfaction of an organic want of the artist, and, secondly, the influencing of his fellow-creatures. It follows that to art are applicable the principles by which every other human activity, pursuing the

same ends, is judged, *i. e.*, the principles of law and of morality. We are reminded that the Middle Ages had places of sanctuary, where criminals could not be molested for their misdemeanors. Modern law has done away with this institution, and ought art to be at present the only asylum to which criminals may fly with a prospect of escaping punishment? Shall they be suffered to satisfy in the so-called "temple" of art, instincts which the policeman prevents them from appeasing in the street? Passing over what is said regarding painting and sculpture, with which we are here not specially concerned, we note that a sharp distinction is drawn between poetry and prose-fiction on the one hand, and the pictorial and plastic arts on the other. The oral or written word can hardly in itself produce an effect of sensuous beauty by its auditory or visual image, even if it presents itself rhythmically regulated and rendered musical by the tinkling of rhyme. It must operate almost solely by its content, by the thoughts or emotions it communicates. In the case of words, therefore, the impression can no longer be a composite one, partly pleasing, partly unpleasing, as at the sight of a finely painted representation of a repulsive incident; the effect of such an incident, verbally described, must be purely disagreeable. The unconscientious and non-tragical, or falsely tragical, portrayals of vice and crime in literature have no doubt their public, the public of the gaols; but a healthy mind feels itself violently repelled by works of this kind, and finds itself incapable of receiving an æsthetic impression from them, be their form never so conformable to the approved rules of art. Everything depends, however, upon a writer's point of view, and on the emotions with which he regards his subject, and which the reader is intended to share. When a work betrays indifference on the author's part to the evil or ugliness depicted; nay betrays, even a predilection for it; then the abhorrence provoked by the composition is intensified by all the disgust which the author's aberration of instinct excites in us. It is far otherwise when a poem or a novel allows us to recognize the upright moral purpose of an author, and reveals to us his well-directed sympathetic emotion. The effect of such writings, whatever their theme, is cleansing, invigorating, ennobling. No honest man or woman, for instance, can doubt the morality of the author's emotions and intentions, when he reads the murder scene in Dostoïevsky's "Raskolnikoff," or watches the disastrous entangle-

ments that form the pivots of Mr. Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," of Mr. Caine's "Manxman," and of the singularly pathetic story lately published in this country, "Poppaea," by Julien Gordon. Novels written in this high-minded way fulfill in their relatively modest fashion the conditions which Aristotle laid down for the composition of tragedies. No matter, so he thought, how deplorable the incident selected for a subject, provided it be so treated as thoroughly to purge the passions by a touching or appalling example; provided, in other words, the wholesome emotions of fear and pity be excited; dread of the doom of the evil-doer, compassion for the victim of misfortune, pity for those who err. It is creditable to Mr. Nordau that he carefully discriminates between works of fiction written in this exemplary spirit, and those which evince on the author's part a callous indifference, or a morbid attraction, to the derelictions portrayed.

IV.

IT seems evident that the phase through which literature is passing in these closing years of the century is transitory, like the unsettled state of the public conscience which it reflects. We must put a stop to the invasion of books and newspapers by diabolists, and to the intrusion of anarchists in politics, or organized human society must cease to exist. The natural presumption that in such a crisis the social system will contrive to right itself and purge itself by a violent reaction is confirmed by the observation of what has uniformly happened at similar conjunctures in the past. It is plain, for instance, that the Roman commonwealth must have collapsed prematurely from moral gangrene and social incoherence had the views and lives of the ruling class remained what they had been from the accession of Tiberius to the death of Domitian. But Rome had still a mission to fulfill, and felt an irresistible impulse to moral rehabilitation. In the place of the old ethical standards and religious sanctions then contemned, her citizens sought new ones, and found them in the Stoic philosophy, based as it was on the idea of universal law in nature and of ever-binding duty among men. The consequent regeneration of the State is disclosed not only in the amendments of the civil law respecting slavery, and in the writings of Marcus Aurelius, but also in the exquisitely idealized tale of Psyche, so oddly inserted in a narrative, which,

as regards the prevailing moral tone, might have been penned by a Paris decadent of our own day. So, too, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the heart and conscience of Western Europe perceived that the Church and civil society were alike imperilled by the carnival of lust and blasphemy enacted in the Provençal-speaking lands ; and to them, accordingly, was applied the rough, but needful, surgery of the Albigensian Crusade. Thenceforward the troubadours ceased to sing ; but men lost nothing from restriction to the relatively pure and high ideals embodied by trouvères and minnesingers in such epics as the "Song of Roland," the "Niebelungen Lied," and the "Morte d'Arthur." Still more familiar is the tremendous internal reform of Catholicism in the last half of the sixteenth century, a reform to which no intelligent Protestant denies that the Society of Jesus most signally contributed. That impressive upburst toward regeneration found a literary type in Tasso, who chose a crusade for the subject of his "Jerusalem Delivered," and infused religious fervor into the conception of his hero. Then, again, amid the waning days of the French *ancien régime*, and while Voltaire and the Encyclopedists were the dictators of opinion, the necessity of discovering a substitute for the faith overthrown became patent to Rousseau, who turned gropingly to nature for laws that she has never promulgated, and strove to deduce the rights of man from the status of an imaginary tenant of an Arcadian dreamland. We need only recur in passing to the subsequent vehement recoil of, at least, a part of the French people from the impiety and vice which had whelmed the revolutionary epoch, a recoil disclosed in the philosophical, historical, and controversial writings of De Maistre, Joubert, Lamennais, and Montalembert, and no less clearly in the artistic compositions of Chateaubriand and Lamartine.

Thus we see that at every preceding period more or less analogous to ours, the decay of faith and the resultant relaxation of all moral ties—a decay and relaxation always reflected in the contemporary literature—have sooner or later roused men to the consciousness of a grave social danger, and awakened them to the fact that the concepts of altruistic ethics lie at the root of all humane civilization. If the old sanctions of duty and unselfishness cannot be re-established, new and effective ones must be secured or no organized society of a benign and lofty type can stand. Mr.

Nordau's book is itself a symptom of the wide-spread indignation and disgust which precede a purifying and a hygienic reaction. Nor are there lacking other signs no less unmistakable, nay, perhaps, much more significant. We refer to the somewhat cold and dry, but lucid, exact and cogent criticism of M. Brunetière, who if he does not entirely repudiate for France the doctrine of art for art's sake, exposes to scorn and ridicule its extravagant, vagrant and disgraceful applications. And what but a good omen can we read in the almost simultaneous publication of such books as those of Mr. Benjamin Kidd, of Prof. Henry Drummond and Mr. A. J. Balfour, in which the fundamental relations to conduct and progress, of science on the one hand and religion on the other, are re-examined from the view-point of the vital necessities of mankind.

There is ground for hope, if not for belief, that the twentieth century will witness a bracing revival of idealism, or at least of an eclectic realism that will differ from it only in name. When Mr. Nordau, with so much ingenuity, and with such undeniable breadth of culture, strives to find in physical regeneration the remedy for the lamentable divagations of our age-end literature, whereas the cure is only to be found in a change of spiritual conditions, he reminds one of the mediæval pilgrims who

“ went so far to seek
In Golgotha Him dead that lives in Heaven.”

M. W. HAZELTINE.